

The online delivery of VET during the COVID-19 pandemic: part 2

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About the research

The online delivery of VET during the COVID-19 pandemic: part 2

Sheila Hume and Tabatha Griffin, NCVET

The coronavirus pandemic created unprecedented challenges for the vocational education and training (VET) sector. This report, the second of two, presents insights into the experiences of registered training organisations (RTOs) that transitioned to online delivery in response to the pandemic and describes how their experiences may shape their intentions to deliver VET online in the future. These insights have been informed by a survey of 1247 RTOs, administered in collaboration with the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA), and through fifteen semi-structured interviews with case study RTOs.

Key messages

- Many RTOs moved from face-to-face to online training delivery in response to the coronavirus pandemic. Of those RTOs surveyed that *only* delivered face-to-face training pre-pandemic, about two thirds transitioned at least some training online in response to this health emergency.
- Transitioning delivery online was a complex exercise for RTOs. Determining the suitability of the material for online delivery needed to be considered at the micro level (that is, individual units), as opposed to the skill set, qualification or training package level.
- The suitability of online delivery extends beyond the practicalities of training and assessment.
 - Training in highly emotive topics, such as suicide risk, child protection, and family and domestic violence, can be traumatic for some students. RTOs raised concerns about their ability to provide a duty of care for students when delivering training of this nature online.
 - Face-to-face learning was deemed critical by RTOs delivering foundation skills, especially where students had learning comprehension difficulties.
- Not all students have the language, literacy, numeracy and digital (LLND) skills required to learn effectively in an online context.
- Training courses that contained a high proportion of practical components were particularly challenging to transfer online, with many RTOs transitioning theoretical components online while delaying practical elements. This had implications for students' continuity of learning and placed additional pressure on trainers.
- Around three-quarters of RTOs surveyed agreed that the move to online delivery, while challenging, had provided opportunities to review the effectiveness of existing training/assessment delivery methods and encouraged creativity.
- 61.8% of RTOs surveyed intend to use more blended learning in the future, and 22.1% are likely to permanently transfer more units or parts of qualifications online. This raises questions on how to best support RTOs to ensure that their plans for online delivery reflect not only students' needs but also the suitability or otherwise of training material for online delivery.

Simon Walker
Managing Director, NCVET

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We would also like to thank the RTOs that generously gave their time to participate in the semi-structured interviews, sharing their firsthand experiences of delivering training during a pandemic.

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Executive summary

The introduction of strict social distancing measures and mandated lockdowns necessitated by the coronavirus pandemic created new and unprecedented challenges for the vocational education and training (VET) sector. In response, approximately three-quarters (75.2%) of registered training organisations (RTOs) surveyed in early 2021 moved training to an online environment. The substantial shift to online training delivery was also identified through an analysis of total VET activity (TVA) data,¹ with the number of subjects being delivered via an online-only mode increasing by almost 24% in 2020 compared with 2019.

This project provides a picture of how the VET system responded in 2020 to the uncertainty and challenges – to training delivery and assessment – generated by the pandemic, also detailing its influence on RTOs' future training delivery plans. The findings from this research have been presented as a two-part series. In part 1, the incidence of online training during the first year of the pandemic is compared with the incidence pre-pandemic using administrative data, along with an investigation of training types and subject results across these periods (Hume & Griffin 2021). In this report, part 2, we explore the journeys of RTOs and their use of online training delivery – from pre-pandemic through to their pandemic response and future intentions. A survey of RTOs and in-depth interviews explored the barriers and opportunities of the move to online training delivery. Case studies of five different areas of training are also presented, demonstrating the variable challenges experienced across the VET sector.

The move to online training delivery

The delivery of training in an online context was not a new concept for many of the surveyed RTOs, with approximately half delivering at least some training online prior to the pandemic. Although it was evident that this pre-pandemic experience played a part in the ability or desire to shift online, it's important to recognise that close to two-thirds of the surveyed RTOs that were *not* delivering any training online prior to the pandemic moved some training online in response to this national health emergency.

Discussions with the case study RTOs revealed that the amount of material transferred online was largely determined by the extent of the associated practical training and assessment. Trainers delivering courses containing large amounts of practical components – such as those from trades qualifications – were only able to transition the theory components of those courses online, delaying delivery of the practical elements. This had implications for the curriculum sequence, with theory being moved forward to fill the gaps left by the delayed practical components. Once the practical elements could be resumed, trainers often had to reteach the accompanying theory, since students struggled to remember what had been taught (earlier) online. This reshuffling of the curriculum not only had implications for students and their learning but also placed additional demand on trainers.

To facilitate the move to online, many of the surveyed RTOs that were *not* delivering online training prior to the pandemic introduced new software to their organisations – primarily meeting platforms (69.9%) and learning management systems (LMS; 28.6%). Others upgraded or expanded existing tools, including meeting platforms (30.1%), digital tools such as Prezi or PowerPoint (30.1%) and learning management systems (29.3%). Around half of the RTOs that shifted their training online indicated that their trainers received training in specific technology. For many of the case study RTOs, this training often consisted of

¹ See Hume & Griffin (2021) for the full analysis of TVA data.

initial formal training, which was followed by informal collaboration and ideas-sharing between trainers. These informal collaborations were used by trainers to share arrangements that worked well with their students and to seek feedback on the challenges encountered.

The surveyed RTOs held mixed views of how this shift to an online environment had influenced the quality of training delivery. More than a third indicated that the quality of training did not change when it shifted online in response to the pandemic, although similar proportions stated that quality had declined with the move, a decline predominantly caused by poor student engagement, a lack of face-to-face interaction, and a reduction in practical training. Further, more than a quarter of RTOs indicated that training quality improved when training shifted online. This was primarily due to the flexibility offered by online training, the ability to change or update resources, and improved student engagement. A positive influence on student engagement was particularly noticeable for a case study RTO delivering the Certificate III and Diploma in Early Childhood Education and Care. This RTO introduced a mobile-friendly learning management system, which allowed their predominantly full-time-employed students the flexibility to undertake training in short bursts, at a time and place suited to them.

Challenges and opportunities

Although more than 84% of surveyed RTOs reported that trainers and assessors had adapted well to the shift online, they also acknowledged that trainers and assessors were challenged by:

- the time pressure/urgency to shift online (62.8%)
- the time commitment required for developing online resources (60%)
- students who lacked the digital skills necessary for online learning (58.6%).

When considering the range of challenges that students may have faced with the shift online, the unsuitability of online delivery for some students was perceived by RTOs to be the greatest challenge (71.7%), followed by:

- isolation/lack of peer interaction (63.4%)
- maintaining engagement in an online environment (62%).

These findings are consistent with those of the 2021 National Student Outcomes Survey, which found the main challenges students faced with the shift to online learning in response to the pandemic were a lack of face-to-face interaction with both trainers and peers.

Mature-age students,² with a lack of digital skills and low confidence in using technology and software, were identified in both the RTO survey and the semi-structured interviews as the cohort who struggled most when transitioning to online training delivery.

Although RTOs and their trainers and students faced many challenges, around three-quarters of RTOs surveyed agreed that the swift and unexpected transition to online training delivery also provided opportunities. When RTOs were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed with a range of statements about the arrangements that worked well or not so well with the move online, the following three had the highest levels of agreement:

² A definition of mature-age students was not provided, meaning that the parameters of this term were open to interpretation.

- The shift to online delivery provided the opportunity to review the effectiveness of existing training/assessment delivery methods (74.8% agree).
- There was increased opportunity for innovation and creativity with the shift to online delivery (74% agree).
- The shift to online delivery provided the opportunity to review the quality of existing training/assessment content (72.5% agree).

What comes next?

Due to the ongoing nature and volatility of the coronavirus pandemic, predicting the style and format of future VET delivery is challenging. The survey findings indicate the use of blended delivery modes in VET will likely increase. About 62% of RTOs surveyed stated they were likely to use more blended delivery modes in the future, while 22.1% were likely to permanently transfer more units or parts of qualifications online. This view was echoed by many RTOs in the semi-structured interviews, with the forced move online prompting the realisation that certain units, courses, or parts thereof, were suited to online delivery. For example, RTOs delivering training in the construction, manufacturing and electrotechnology areas found that certain soft skill³ units could be successfully taught online.

RTOs take many factors into consideration when determining the suitability of online training. For example, delivering training on emotive topics, those that include suicide risk, child protection, and family and domestic violence, can be traumatic for some students. For this reason, units of a highly emotive nature were not considered suited to online delivery (even where they contained no practical elements), with RTOs concerned about their ability to adequately provide a duty of care for the emotional wellbeing of their students.

While acknowledging the plans of many RTOs to expand their online training offerings, the effects on students must also be considered. Research demonstrates that online VET delivery can be associated with poorer student outcomes (Xu & Jagers 2013; Griffin & Mihelic 2019). Due to the extent of the shift to online training in response to the pandemic, it is likely that student outcomes data over the next few years will paint a much clearer picture of the true impact of the pandemic on students. The challenge for policy-makers, regulators and RTOs will be balancing any long-term changes to delivery modes with the potential impacts this could have on student experiences and outcomes.

3 Also known as employability skills or generic skills: 'Employability skills are a set of broad skills, including communication, problem-solving and teamwork' (Wibrow 2011).



Implications of the pandemic on VET – beyond lockdowns and restrictions

Context

The coronavirus pandemic has triggered extraordinary interruptions to the way we live, work, and learn. Registered training organisations (RTOs) have been challenged to rethink how they deliver training while adhering to constantly changing restrictions and snap lockdowns. Even though the sector is navigating a disrupted training environment, suggestions have been made globally that, if the VET sector responds appropriately, in the long-term a stronger and more resilient sector may emerge (OECD 2020). It is clear through this research that many RTOs are reconsidering their future training delivery plans and have an increased appetite for blended learning styles as a result of their experiences through the pandemic.

There is no denying that RTOs transitioned a significant amount of training online⁴ in response to the pandemic.

Between 2019 and 2020, the proportion of subjects delivered solely online increased by 23.9%, and approximately 75% of RTOs surveyed in early 2021 had moved at least some training online (Hume & Griffin 2021). The transition to online delivery has implications for VET due to the largely practical nature of training and assessment in the sector. Although the delivery of online training met an urgent need, some countries have reported that the validity of online learning is perceived to be lower for VET than other education streams (OECD 2021).

This report, part 2 of a two-part series, provides insight into the pandemic's potential to permanently change how some training is delivered by many RTOs; it also describes in detail the ways in which RTOs navigated the shift to online training delivery in response to the pandemic. Part 1 of this project discussed the immediate pandemic response by means of an analysis of 2019 and 2020 administrative data, also providing a glimpse of the impact of the pandemic on RTOs and their training delivery (Hume & Griffin 2021). Appendix A describes the methodology and research questions guiding this project.

Survey limitations

The insights presented in this report have been drawn from a survey of RTOs that was jointly administered with the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA). There are limitations to the survey findings, and the following issues should be considered when reading this report:

- The findings represent the perceptions and experiences from a point in time of those RTOs who completed the survey. They do not account for the differing perceptions and experiences that could be held by survey non-completers, or account for reasons of survey non-completion.

Key points

- RTOs responded to pandemic restrictions by shifting a significant amount of training online
- RTOs have mixed views about the quality of VET delivered online
- Even with mixed views, there is a strong intent among RTOs to use more blended learning in the future
- The main risks RTOs associated with online training delivery are poor student engagement, and the integrity of practical assessment.

4 The terms 'online learning' and 'online training delivery' have been used in this research to describe the delivery of training via the internet.

- Only ASQA-regulated training providers⁵ were invited to participate in the online survey.
- Out of 3280 RTOs invited to participate, 1247 (38%) responded.
- Data were collected between 19 February and 23 March 2021.

5 As at November 2021 ASQA regulates approximately 90% of Australian training providers: <<https://www.asqa.gov.au/about/asqa/our-role>>. RTOs regulated by the Victorian Registration and Qualifications Authority (VRQA) and the Training Accreditation Council in Western Australia (TAC) were not represented in the sample. The VRQA and TAC regulate RTOs that operate solely in either Victoria or Western Australia and do not offer courses online or to overseas students. RTOs that do operate solely in either of these states *and* offer courses online or to overseas students are regulated by ASQA.



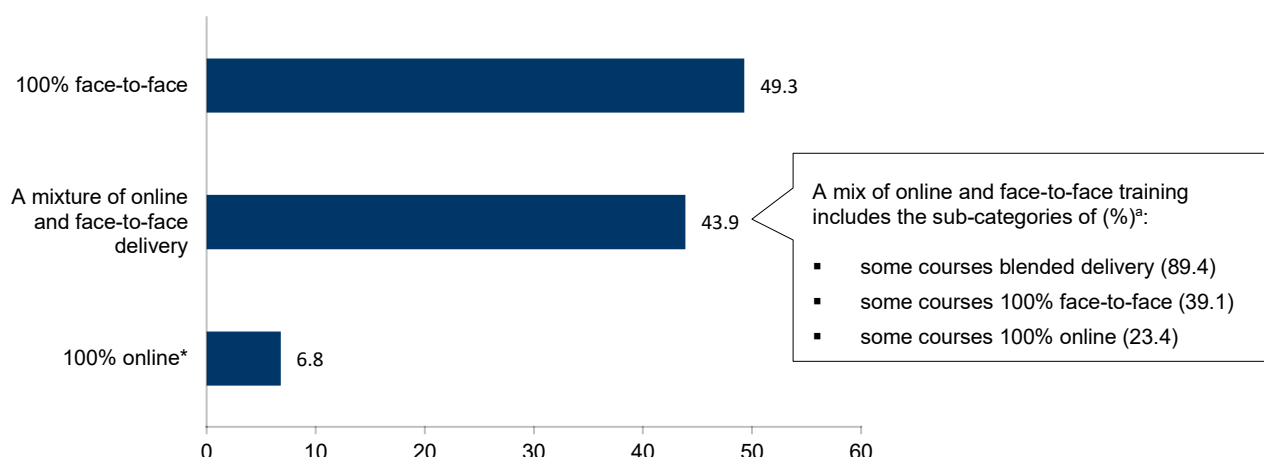
Pre-pandemic training delivery landscape

Prior to the pandemic, 43.9% of the surveyed RTOs used a mix of online and face-to-face delivery modes to deliver the training they had on-scope of their registration (figure 1). Almost half of those surveyed, however, reported that before the pandemic all of their training had been delivered in a face-to-face setting, while fewer than one in 10 had been delivering training completely online.

It should be noted that delivering ‘a mixture of online and face-to-face delivery’ can be different for different RTOs. It could mean, for example, that some courses on an RTO’s scope were delivered using a blended delivery mode while others were delivered completely face-to-face or completely online. Or, to give another example, it might mean that some courses were delivered completely online while others were delivered completely face-to-face.

The pull-out box in figure 1 shows how RTOs described their own mixture of online and face-to-face delivery, noting that multiple choices were possible. The figure shows that, among the 43.9% of RTOs who initially reported delivering a mix of online and face-to-face training prior to the pandemic, most had courses on scope that used a blended delivery mode (89.4%).

Figure 1 Pre-pandemic delivery of training, as reported by surveyed RTOs, 2021 (%)



Note: The survey asked the following questions:

Q: Prior to COVID-19, did your organisation offer any training/assessment through online delivery? Single response (n = 1247).

Q: Which of the following delivery modes did you use prior to COVID-19? Multiple choice. The total/denominator represents the number of providers who selected a mixture of online and face-to-face delivery for pre-pandemic training delivery (n = 547).

*100% online is the sum of: '100% online: All courses on my scope of registration were delivered 100% online' and '100% online (except practical work placements): All courses on my scope of registration were delivered 100% online, excluding practical work placement'.

^a The sum of percentages is more than 100% as this question allowed for multiple responses. For example, an RTO could have delivered some courses through blended delivery, some only face-to-face, and others completely online.

Source: ASQA and NCVET online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

Among all of the RTOs surveyed, the incidence of mixed online and face-to-face delivery was highest among TAFE (technical and further education) institutes at 93% (n = 14), likely reflecting the size of these RTOs and the quantum of training they have on scope.

Case study findings — online delivery pre-pandemic

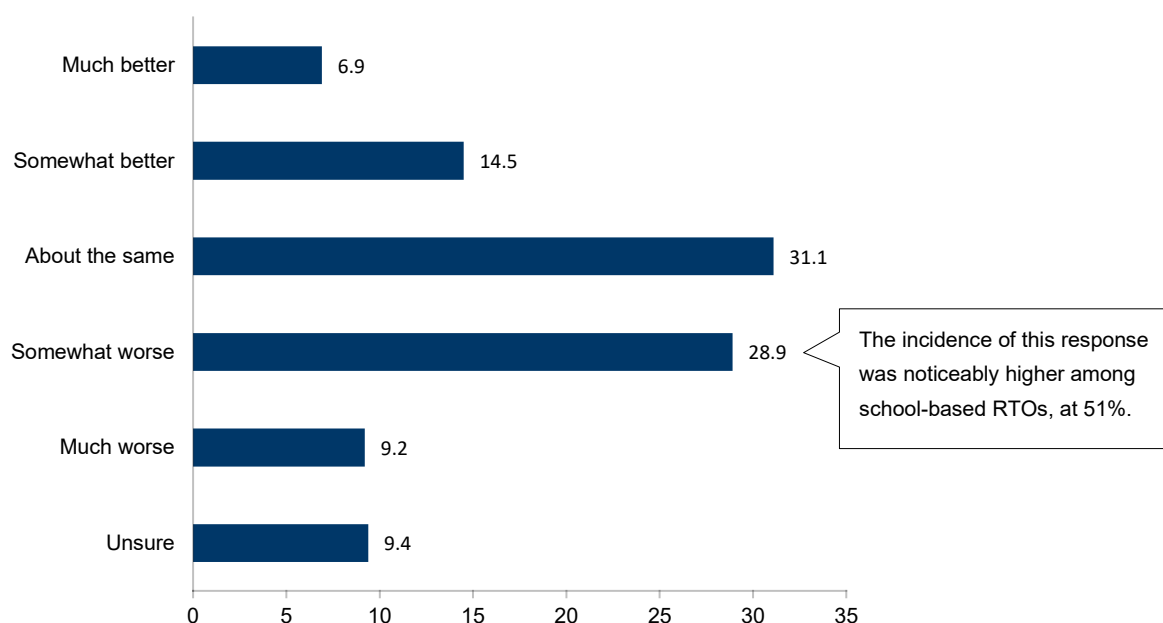
The semi-structured interviews showed RTOs had mixed interests and capabilities in online training delivery pre-pandemic. The following categories broadly describe the different approaches to online training delivery taken by the case study RTOs prior to the pandemic:

- no prior consideration of this delivery mode (mainly trades-based and group training organisations)
- previously considered online training delivery, but decided not to pursue it; two key factors drove this decision: unsuitability of training for online delivery and/or a reluctance among RTO decision-makers
- already putting plans in place to deliver VET online
- previous experience in delivering VET online.

Perceptions of quality (pre-pandemic)

Just under 40% of RTOs surveyed held negative perceptions of the overall quality of online training delivery when compared with face-to-face training delivery (figure 2), while about 21% believed it to be somewhat or much better.

Figure 2 Overall perceptions of the quality of online training compared with face-to-face training, 2021 (%)



Note: The survey asked the following question: Overall, how do you think the quality of online delivery compares with face-to-face delivery? Single response (n = 1247).

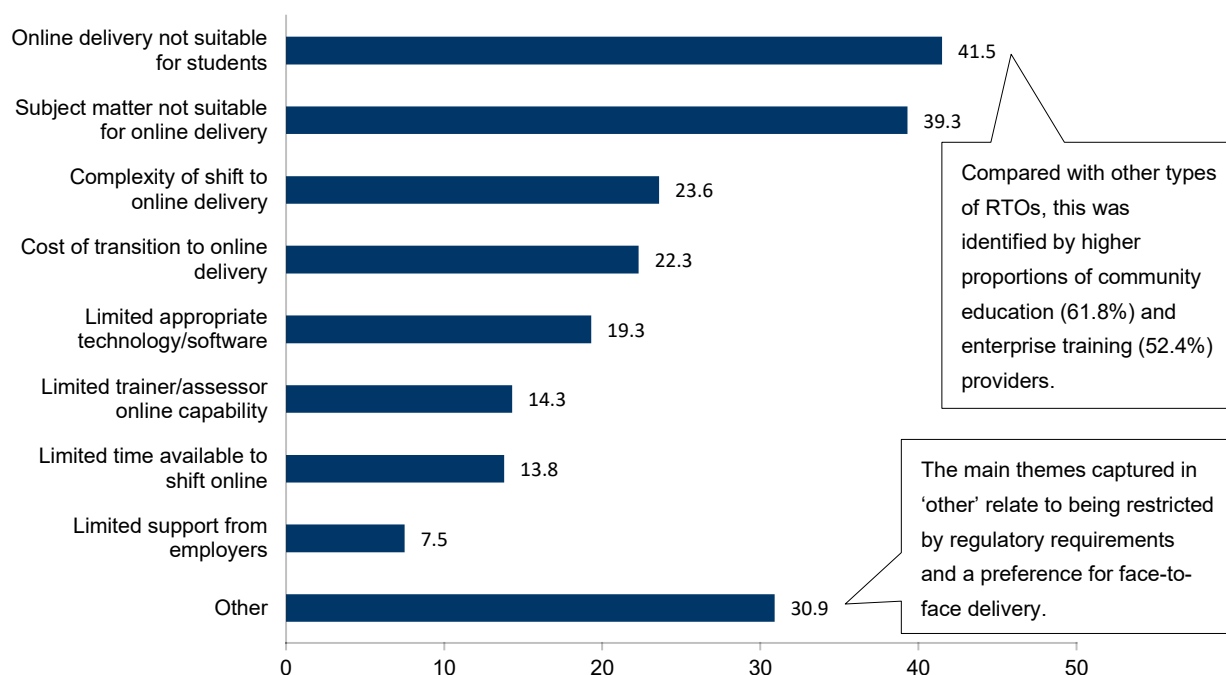
Source: ASQA and NCVET online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

This project did not investigate the drivers of these quality perceptions among RTOs. Given the ongoing pandemic and the likelihood of increased online delivery in the future, these findings highlight a need to ensure that RTOs are supported to provide quality training, regardless of the delivery mode.

Barriers to delivering training online

When RTOs that did not deliver any training online prior to the pandemic were asked why they had not offered it, the top two barriers cited were that online delivery was not suitable for students and the subject matter was not suitable for online delivery (figure 3). Other barriers cited related to the complexity, cost, lack of appropriate skills and/or technology associated with transferring and delivering training online.

Figure 3 Barriers to delivering online training prior to COVID-19, 2021 (%)



Note: The survey asked the following question: What are the main reasons your organisation did not offer online delivery prior to COVID-19? Please select all that apply. Multiple choice. The total/denominator represents the number of providers who did not deliver any training online pre-pandemic (n = 615).

Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

The barrier of 'online delivery not suitable for students' is quite broad, and although this survey did not investigate the nuances and reasons underpinning this response, the semi-structured interviews with case study RTOs delivering training from the Hairdressing and Beauty (SHB) Training Package and the Foundation Skills Training Package provide some insight into this, as described in the boxes below.

Case study findings – hairdressing and beauty

The case study RTOs delivering training from the Hairdressing and Beauty Training Package expressed a strong resistance to online training, not only prior to the pandemic but also in their response to the pandemic. Their move online was born out of necessity – as a means of ensuring the continuity of student learning – during the time they were unable to teach face-to-face. These RTOs described their students as being people-oriented and preferring a face-to-face environment, believing this was related to the nature of the industry for which their students are training, stating that *our students and industry are people-focused*.

According to these case study RTOs, a range of factors informed the unsuitability of online training – the view that this training package could not be effectively delivered online due to the highly practical nature of the training and the frequent need for specialised equipment and tools for training, as well as the perception that industry holds a strong preference for graduates who complete their training in a face-to-face environment. It should be noted that training in hairdressing is predominantly conducted through an apprenticeship, combining work with training.

See case study 3 (page 34) for more detail about the experiences of these case study RTOs.

Case study findings – foundation skills

The case study RTOs that deliver training from the Foundation Skills Training Package reported low levels of online delivery prior to the pandemic. The RTOs explained that it was not the course content that was challenging to deliver online – noting that these case study RTOs moved 100% of the foundation skills courses they had on scope online during the pandemic – it was that students enrolled in this training package often experienced challenges with online training delivery.

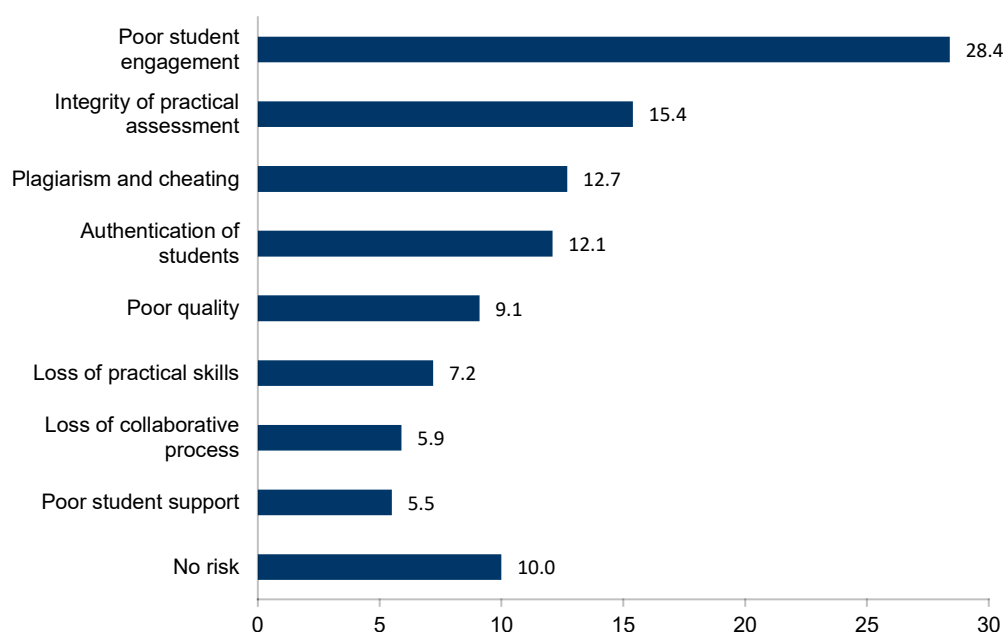
The RTOs delivering foundation skills training reported having a high proportion of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as migrants with low English and low literacy skills, for whom these RTOs consider face-to-face learning to be more suitable. Understanding the nuances associated with this training package and the specific challenges of its student base provides some explanation for the low levels of online delivery prior to the pandemic and the sizeable shift online in response to the pandemic. The content was relatively simple to transition online, with the challenges concerned with supporting the student cohort for whom online learning was not always suitable.

See case study 1 (page 30) for more detail about the experiences of these case study RTOs.

Risks of online delivery

When survey participants were asked in a free-text question to describe the risks associated with online learning in ensuring quality training and assessment outcomes, more than one-quarter of RTOs identified poor student engagement. Other risk-related concerns included student honesty and integrity, and implications for the learning process (figure 4). Challenges and concerns around student engagement were also reflected in many of the semi-structured interviews, regardless of the training package or qualification being taught.

Figure 4 Most common risks to training and assessment outcomes that RTOs associate with the delivery of online training, 2021 (%)



Note: The survey asked the following question: Based on your experience and understanding of online learning, what risks to the quality of training/assessment outcomes do you associate with online learning? Open-ended (n = 1247).

Please see table B2 in appendix B for the full list of responses.

Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.



How the pandemic changed training delivery

The immediate impact of the pandemic on training delivery was undeniable, with around three-quarters (75.2%) of the surveyed RTOs transitioning at least some of their training online.^{6,7}

Of note, however, is that almost two-thirds of survey participants who did *not* deliver any online training prior to the pandemic shifted at least some training online (figure 5). This represents a substantial change for these RTOs and therefore potentially steep learning curves in relation to technology and online training delivery platforms.

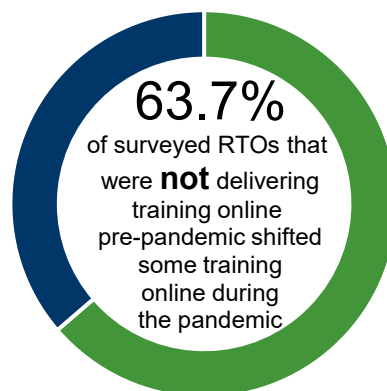
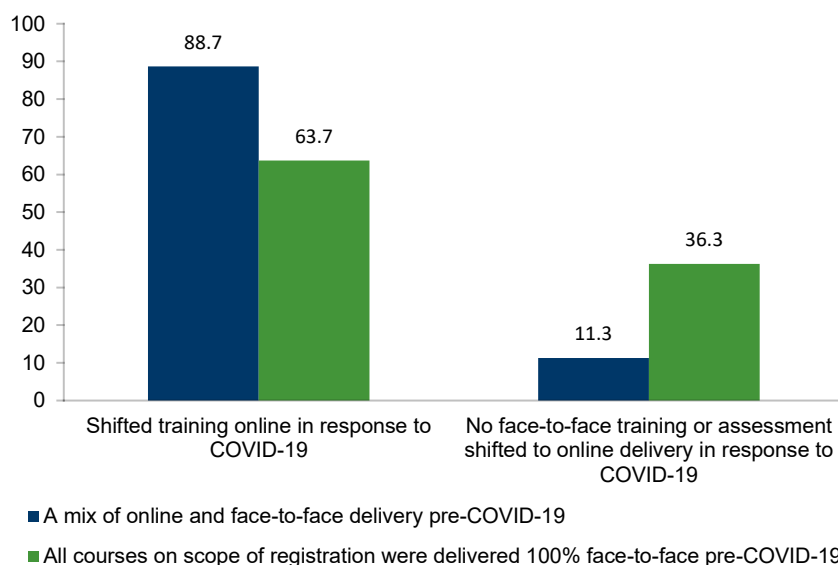


Figure 5 Incidence of RTOs shifting some training online in response to the pandemic by pre-COVID delivery mode, 2021 (%)



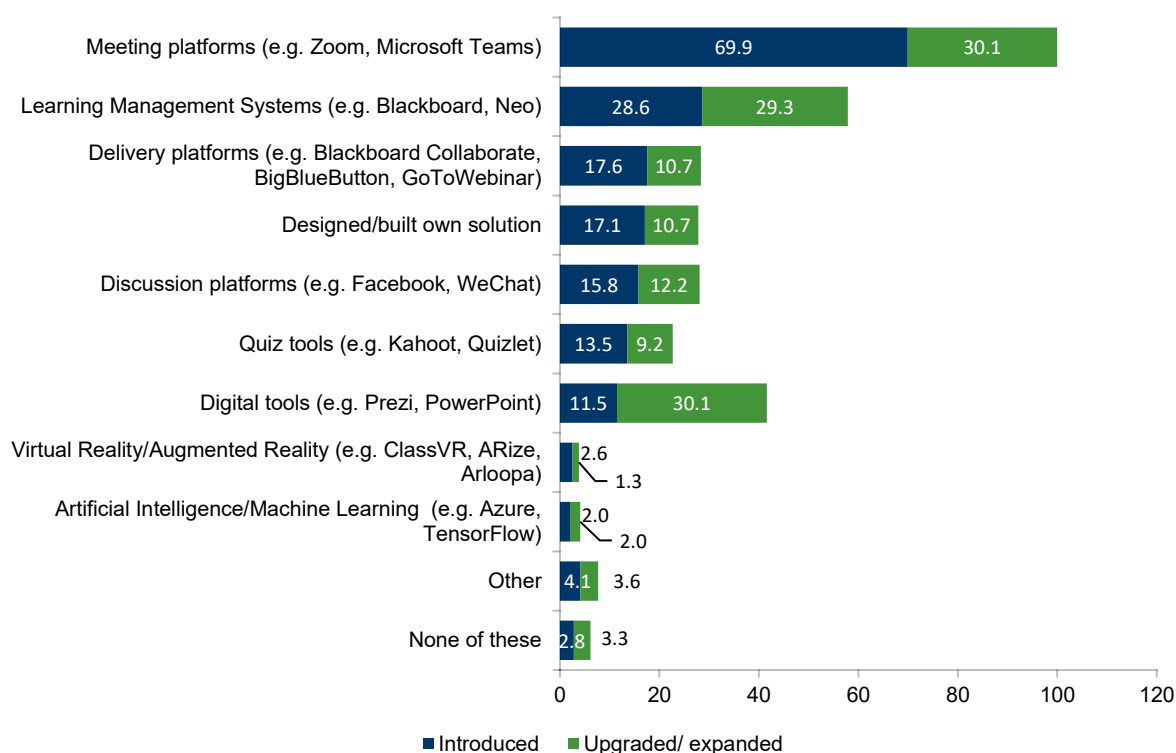
Note: The survey asked the following question: In response to COVID-19, which of the following scenarios was most relevant to your organisation? The total/denominator represents the number of providers who either provided all services online (excluding practical work placements), blended delivery or no online pre-COVID (that is, everything except all online) (n = 1188).

Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

- 6 This means that in response to the pandemic, an RTO shifted training online that, prior to the pandemic, was being delivered in a face-to-face environment. They may have shifted a unit, subject, multiple units or entire qualifications. The survey did not collect data on the exact proportion of training that was shifted online by each RTO.
- 7 Please see table B6 in appendix B for the reported shift online by state and territory.

To support the transfer to online training delivery, a sizeable portion of surveyed RTOs that were *not* delivering any online training prior to the pandemic had to either introduce new software, and/or upgrade pre-existing software. Almost 70% of these RTOs introduced meeting platforms to their organisation in response to the pandemic, while close to a third upgraded their pre-existing meeting platforms (figure 6). Similar proportions also upgraded digital tools (such as Prezi and PowerPoint) and learning management systems (such as Blackboard, Canvas, Neo, Moodle and TalentLMS).

Figure 6 RTOs that acquired, upgraded or expanded technology for the delivery of online training or assessment in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, 2021 (% of RTOs that did not deliver any online training pre-pandemic, but shifted some training online in response to the pandemic)



Note: The survey asked the following question: Did you acquire/upgrade/expand any technology for the delivery of online training/assessment in response to COVID-19? Please select all relevant options in each column. If none, select 'None of these'. Multiple choice.

Responses to this question have been filtered to show only those who were delivering 100% of their training face-to-face prior to the pandemic and shifted some training online in response to the pandemic (n = 392).

Source: ASQA and NCVET online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

The rapid uptake and expansion of software required many RTOs, trainers and students to become familiar with new digital environments and platforms. Some trainers, as highlighted in the semi-structured interviews, had limited or no experience in using the digital platforms that were acquired, upgraded or expanded to support the online delivery of training.

The surveyed RTOs reported training on specific software (that is, meeting platforms and learning management systems) as the most common type of training provided to trainers, at 83.5%. This was followed by training on:

- specific technology (54.9%)
- how to provide technical support (41.8%)
- identifying/minimising fraud and plagiarism (31.0%)
- units of competency from the TAE skill set relevant to online learning (9.2%).

Case study findings – new software and training

The type of training provided on the use of online meeting platforms and other relevant software was relatively similar across all case study RTOs. This training often included an initial session or two on the use of these platforms, followed by informal collaboration and information-sharing between trainers. This informal communication included collaborative troubleshooting, sharing information on what was found to work well, and new or previously unused features of the software.

While it was reported among case study RTOs that, overall, trainers had adapted well to the shift online, some displayed resistance. A dislike of online learning was reported as being higher among the older cohort of trainers, with a range of reasons identified. These reasons generally related to some trainers having a long history of teaching face-to-face, lack of experience with technology, or some trainers simply preferring the in-person teaching environment.

Delays and suspensions

The decision not to transfer any training online in response to the coronavirus pandemic had clear implications for students and the RTO, with more than half (52.5%) of the RTOs surveyed that did not shift any training online having to suspend some full programs and/or certain subjects/units. Restrictions and the cessation of face-to-face training were the main reasons why full programs and/or subjects/units were suspended, as identified by around three-fifths of these respondents. These suspensions call into question not only the ability of students to complete their training on time (if at all), but also the potential impact this may have on the viability of the RTO.

Further influencing the potential of delayed completion for some students is that close to half (46.9%) of the RTOs surveyed that moved some training online had to delay practical assessments, while 40.6% experienced a delay in mandatory work placements for their students. As shown through the analysis of administrative data in part 1 of this project (Hume & Griffin 2021), the proportion of subject enrolments recording a pass result in 2020 declined by 5% from the previous year and those continuing (i.e. with an as yet undetermined result) increased by more than 3%. The full impact of the pandemic on subject results may not be fully realised until those enrolments marked as continuing become either a pass, fail or withdrawal.

Managing the practical elements of training

Many RTOs ensured continuity of learning in courses with practical components by changing the sequence specified in the curriculum and bringing forward the theory components, a practice that allowed RTOs to provide a level of consistency for students at a time when they were unable to complete the practical elements of their course. This issue of curriculum reordering was raised by many case study RTOs, with similar findings highlighted in a 2020 report by TAFE Directors Australia.

This modification to the curriculum did present challenges for trainers when face-to-face teaching resumed, as they found students struggled to remember the content taught earlier online. Some case study RTOs had to reteach the theory components in full when practical training and assessment resumed, which placed additional pressure on trainers who had to ensure that students were still able to complete their training on time.

Case study findings - increased demand on trainers

Among the case study RTOs that delivered training from either the Construction, Plumbing and Services Training Package, Manufacturing and Engineering Training Package, or Electrotechnology Training Package, there was unanimous agreement that demands on trainers' time increased both during the shift to online delivery and when they returned to the classroom.

One largely trades-based RTO said the additional pressure on trainers when face-to-face training resumed came not only from catching up on missed practical components but also from extended timetables. The return to the classroom was reported as:

A big burden on staff, having to do triple time as class numbers had to be reduced to accommodate COVID-safe procedures.

Due to capacity and social distancing restrictions, classes that may have had 20 students prior to the pandemic had to be downsized to between five and 10 students. Consequently, the trainer was obliged to arrange more face-to-face classes to accommodate all students.

Although these case study RTOs had little to no experience in delivering training online prior to the pandemic, some recognised the opportunity to leverage online training for certain units, particularly those relating to soft (or employability) skills.

See case study 5 (page 38) for more detail about the experiences of these case study RTOs.

What does this mean for quality?

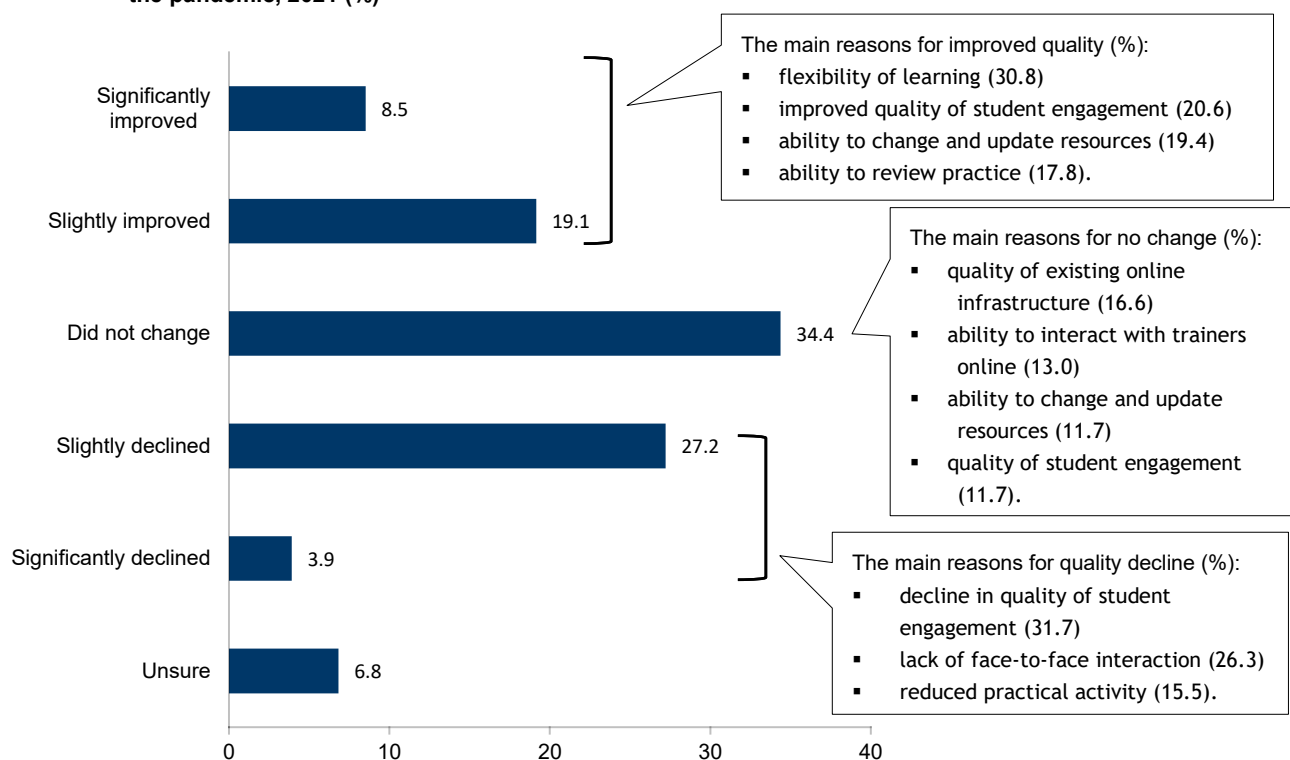
RTOs held mixed views on how the move to an online environment in response to the pandemic impacted upon training quality. Approximately 34% of the surveyed RTOs indicated no change to training quality following the shift to online, while just under a third believed that quality either slightly or significantly declined, and more than a quarter stated that quality had improved (figure 7).

The respondents believed that the flexibility of the online learning environment, the improved student engagement, and the ability to review training practices were the main reasons for training quality improving when shifting online. Perceptions of improved training quality was notably higher among RTOs that had been delivering a mix of online and face-to-face delivery prior to the pandemic.

Due to the nature of this data collection method – an online survey of RTOs – these perceptions of quality improvement or decline are self-reported from the perspective of the RTO and take no account of student perceptions or outcomes.

To provide an element of student perspective to this study, an analysis of selected measures from the 2021 National Student Outcomes Survey⁸ was undertaken. This analysis⁹ showed that 90.4% of students who had training transferred online in response to the pandemic were satisfied with the overall quality of training, a figure slightly above the proportion of students whose training was not moved online and who were satisfied with the overall quality of training (87.7%).

Figure 7 Extent to which RTOs believed the quality of training was impacted by the shift online in response to the pandemic, 2021 (%)



Note: The survey asked the following question: To what extent do you believe the quality of training was impacted by the shift online? Single response. The total/denominator represents the number of providers who had some, parts or all training shifted to online delivery (n = 893).

Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

When RTOs were asked to separately rate how satisfied they perceived students, trainers and employers/industry were with online training, students were perceived to be the most satisfied. Approximately 59% of the surveyed RTOs indicated that their students were somewhat or very satisfied with the delivery of online training, followed by trainers/assessors at 52.7% and employers/industry at 45.1%.

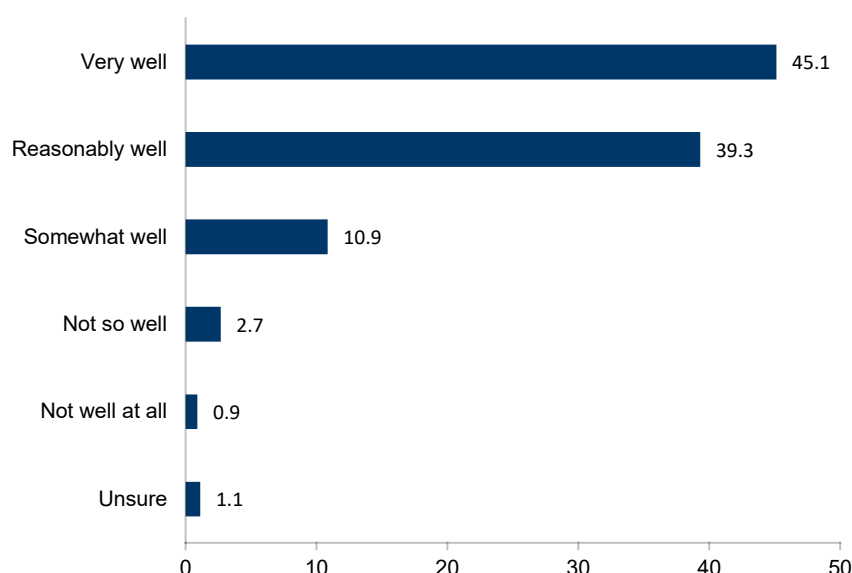
8 'The National Student Outcomes Survey is an annual survey of students who completed their vocational education and training (VET) in Australia during the previous calendar year', <<https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/collections/student-outcomes>>.

9 An analysis was undertaken for qualification completers of a nationally recognised program; this refers 'to a person who completed all the requirements of a training package qualification or accredited qualification' ('Terms and definitions', <<https://www.ncver.edu.au/research-and-statistics/publications/all-publications/vet-student-outcomes-2020>>).

Resilience of trainers in the face of challenges

More than 84% of the surveyed RTOs that shifted training online in response to the pandemic reported their trainers as adapting reasonably or very well to the shift online (figure 8). This view was generally reflected in the semi-structured interviews. While some of the case study RTOs reported hesitation among some trainers when initially moving online (primarily due to preferences for face-to-face teaching), trainers were described, overall, as having adapted well.

Figure 8 RTOs' perceptions of how well trainers/assessors adapted to the shift online, 2021 (%)

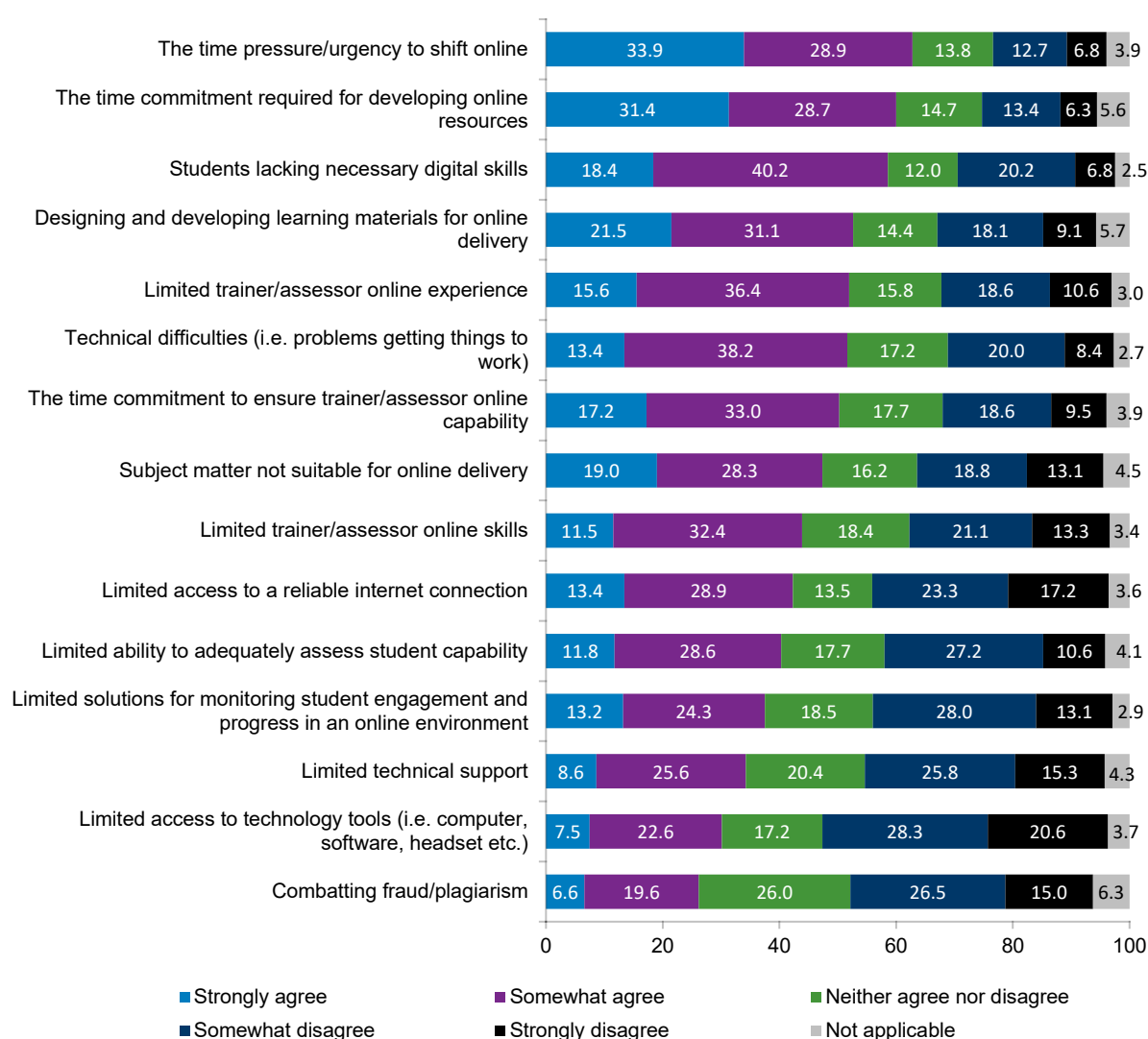


Note: The survey asked the following question: How well do you think your trainers/assessors adapted to the shift to online? Single response. The total/denominator represents the number of providers who had some, parts or all training shifted to online delivery in response to the pandemic (n = 893).

Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

Given the rapid implementation of COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns at the beginning of the pandemic, it is not surprising that the top two challenges for trainers and assessors for the move to an online environment related to a lack of time (figure 9). Close to two-thirds of the RTOs surveyed agreed that 'the time pressure/urgency to shift online' was a challenge, while 60% agreed that 'the time commitment required for developing online resources' was also a challenge. The perception that students lacked the necessary digital skills was also prevalent, with well over half agreeing that this presented a challenge for trainers and assessors. This perspective was even higher among community education providers and TAFE institutes, with around three-quarters of these providers identifying this as a challenge for trainers and assessors.

Figure 9 RTOs' perceptions of the challenges trainers/assessors experienced with the shift to online training, 2021 (%)



Note: The survey asked the following question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the following were challenges for your trainers/assessors when shifting online? The total/denominator represents the number of providers who had some or all training shifted to online delivery in response to the pandemic (n = 893).

Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

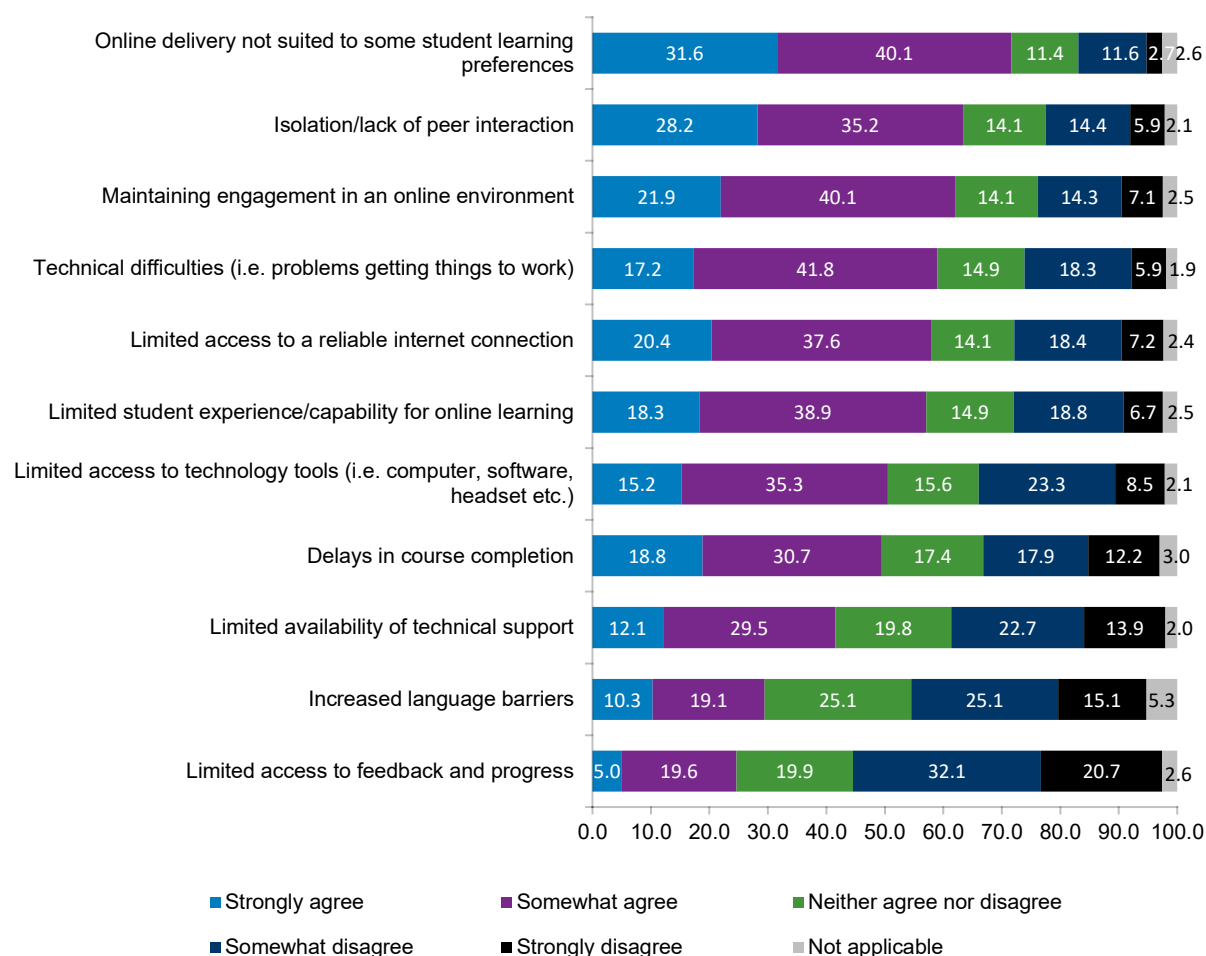
Student experience

Consistent with the opinions RTOs expressed about the challenges trainers/assessors experienced with the shift to online training, the most cited challenges they saw for students were that online delivery is not suited to some students' learning preferences and isolation or lack of peer interaction (figure 10). Many were also concerned about students' ability to remain engaged in an online environment.

Of note are findings from the 2021 National Student Outcomes Survey,¹⁰ which provided insight into students' views of the biggest challenges confronting them when their training was transferred online. About 60% of qualification completers were challenged by a lack of face-to-face interaction with trainers, teachers and instructors, while just under half identified the lack of face-to-face interaction with peers as a challenge.

¹⁰ Analysis was undertaken for qualification completers of a nationally recognised program; for definition see footnote 9.

Figure 10 RTOs' perceptions of the challenges students experienced with the shift to online training, 2021 (%)



Note: The survey asked the following question: To what extent do you agree or disagree that the following were challenges for your students when shifting online? The total/denominator represents the number of providers who had some or all training shifted to online delivery in response to the pandemic (n = 893).

Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

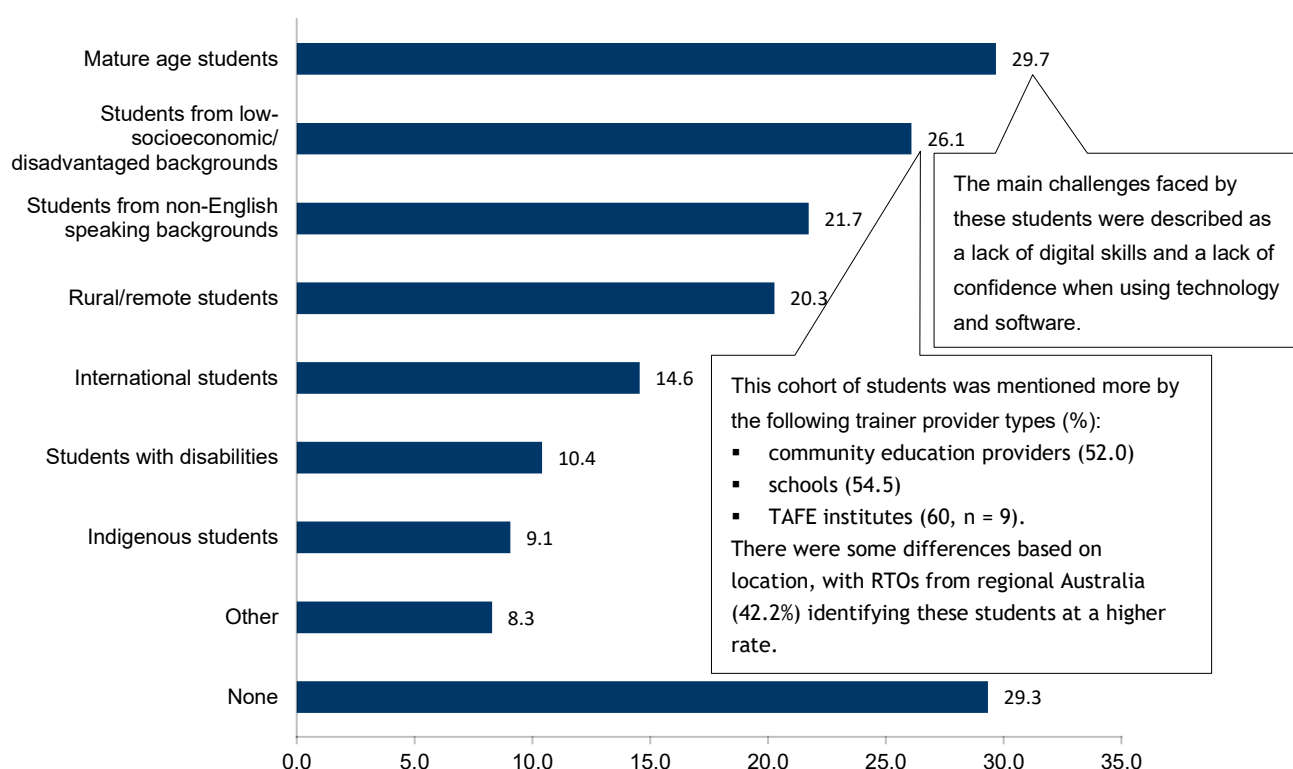
Mature age students¹¹ were identified by close to one-third of surveyed RTOs as having experienced more challenges than other student cohorts in the shift online (figure 11). When these respondents were asked via a free-text question why they considered that this cohort had experienced more challenges, the predominant issues in their responses related to the cohort's lack of digital skills and lack of confidence when using technology and software.

Case study findings — older learners

This view on mature-age students was echoed in the semi-structured interviews, whereby this cohort was consistently identified as having struggled the most with the move to online training delivery. RTOs attributed this mainly to a lack of digital skills and an overall preference for face-to-face interaction. Some case study RTOs also recalled that some mature-age students withdrew from their studies completely or put their studies on hold until face-to-face training resumed. This raises concerns about the long-term impact of the pandemic on this student cohort, and the likelihood of these students completing their training.

¹¹ A definition of mature-age students was not provided. Consequently, the parameters of this term were open to interpretation.

Figure 11 RTOs' perceptions of the student cohorts that experienced more challenges than others with the shift to online training, 2021 (%)



Note: The survey asked the following question: Did any particular student cohorts experience more challenges than others with the shift to online delivery? The total/denominator represents the number of providers who had some or all training shifted to online delivery in response to the pandemic (n = 893).

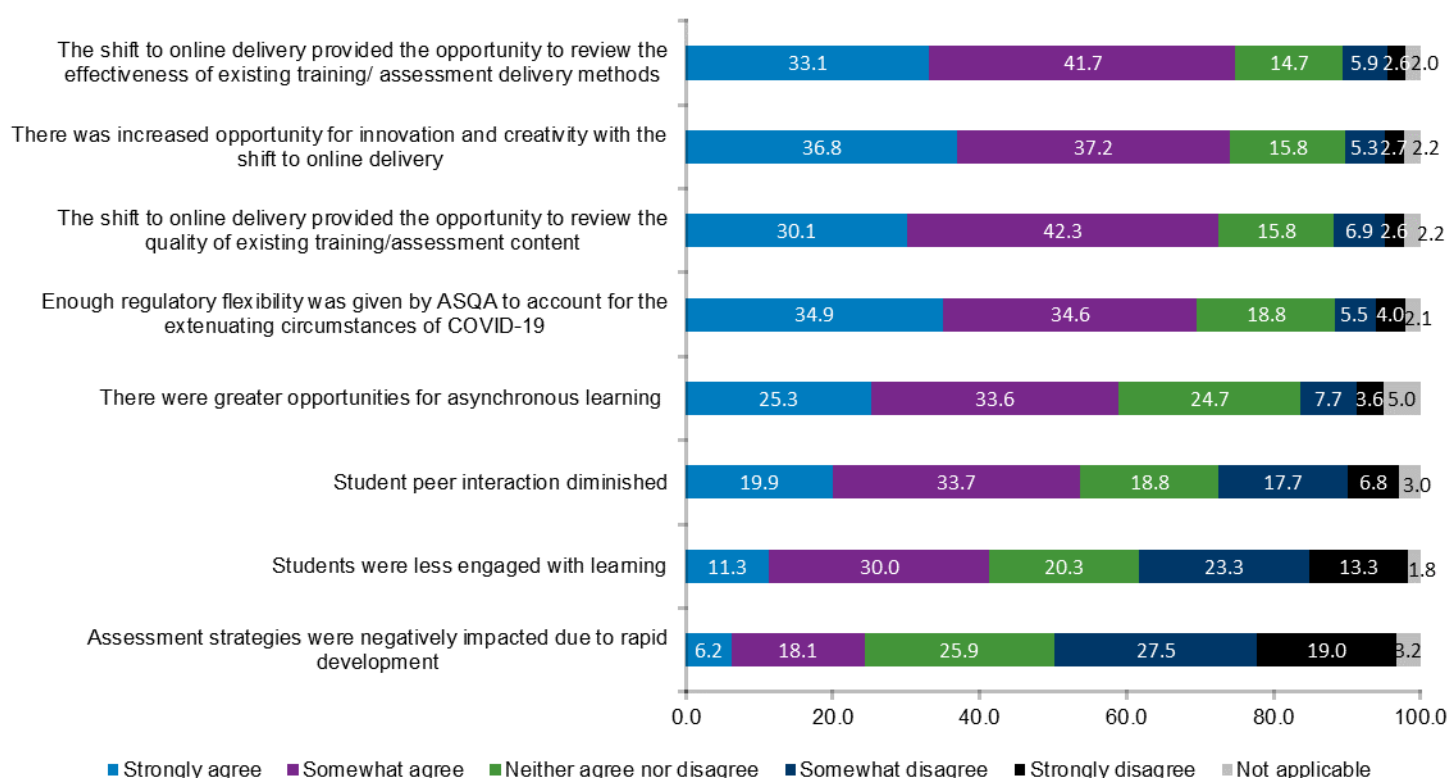
Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

There was a silver lining

Although the transition to online training was undertaken rapidly in response to a national health emergency, many RTOs agreed that this move provided opportunities (figure 12). Around three-quarters of those who shifted some training online agreed that it promoted opportunities:

- to review the effectiveness of existing training/assessment delivery methods (74.8% agree)
- for innovation and creativity (74% agree)
- to review the quality of existing training/assessment content (72.5% agree).

Figure 12 RTOs' perceptions of what worked well and what didn't work well with the shift to online training, 2021 (%)



Note: The survey asked the following question: Thinking about the shift to online learning, we are interested in what you think worked well and didn't work well for your organisation. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following. The total/denominator represents the number of providers who had some or all training shifted to online delivery in response to the pandemic (n = 893).

Source: ASQA and NCVET online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

Case study findings – opportunities found in early childhood education and care

The opportunities provided by the move online was highlighted by one case study RTO that was delivering the Certificate III and Diploma in Early Childhood Education and Care. Prior to the pandemic, this RTO was delivering training predominantly in a face-to-face environment but was in the process of establishing online training capabilities. The pandemic accelerated this shift to online learning and, by investing in a mobile-friendly learning management system, this RTO considered that it was not only able to meet an immediate need by transitioning learning to online, but also to improve their student experience with training. The students of this case study RTO were largely working full-time, with many having family commitments outside work. By implementing a mobile-friendly learning management system, the RTO was able to encourage students to take 'bite size' learning opportunities by engaging with their training in short bursts, whenever they had a few minutes to spare.

This case study RTO noticed that, since the implementation of this mobile-friendly system, students are now more engaged with their learning and are increasingly proactive in their learning journey. The pandemic-induced shift online provided this RTO with the opportunity to accelerate the implementation of online learning and increase student engagement, while also being innovative in how they were delivering training.

See case study 2 (page 32) for more detail about the experiences of this RTO and others delivering training from the Community Services Training Package.

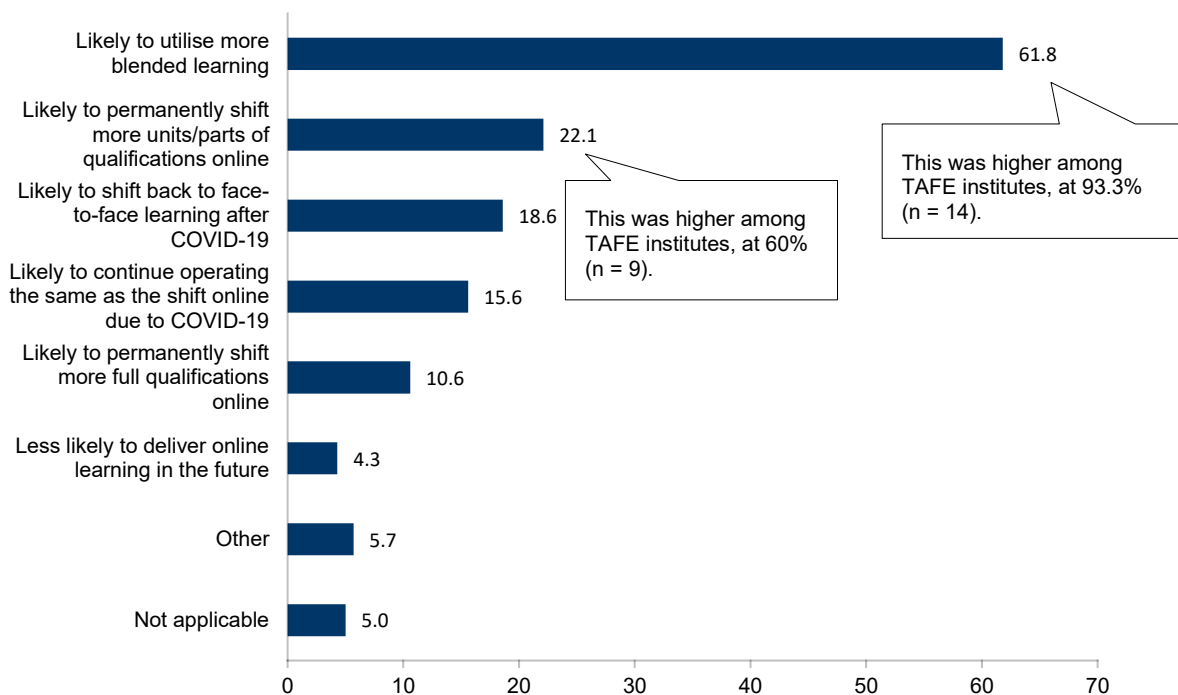


What does the future look like?

Due to the fluid nature of the coronavirus pandemic and the unpredictability of outbreaks, along with rapidly triggering restrictions and lockdowns, RTOs have had to become nimble in how they plan and manage the delivery of training. At the time of the survey (February to March 2021), close to three-quarters of RTOs that had moved some training online were still delivering more training online than before the pandemic. It should be noted that these figures are representative of a point in time for RTOs, when the pandemic was relatively well controlled in Australia.

The influence of the coronavirus pandemic on future training delivery plans is evident. Almost two-thirds of the surveyed RTOs indicated they were likely to use more blended learning in the future, and more than one in five stated they would be likely to permanently shift more units/parts of qualifications online (figure 13).

Figure 13 Influence of the pandemic on RTOs' future online training delivery plans, 2021 (%)



Note: The survey asked the following question: How has the shift online due to COVID-19 influenced your organisation's future plans regarding online delivery? Please select all that apply. Multiple choice. The total/denominator represents the number of providers who had some or all training shifted to online delivery in response to the pandemic (n = 893).

Source: ASQA and NCVET online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

Even among those who plan to use more blended learning in the future and/or permanently transfer more units/parts of qualifications online, there still are mixed perceptions around the quality of online compared with face-to-face learning.

A constraint of this type of survey is that it does not allow for nuanced responses, those that examine the reasons driving these intentions and those behind perceptions of quality. Interviews with case study RTOs did, however, highlight that assessing the suitability of online training delivery is a multifaceted process and needs to be considered at the unit level rather than at the skill set, qualification or training package level.

Case study findings – some units more suited to online delivery than others

A case study RTO that delivered qualifications from the Business Services Training Package reported that units relating to project management were relatively easy to transition and teach online, while units focusing on human management and human resources were more challenging to deliver online as they require a higher degree of interaction and teamwork from students.

See case study 4 (page 36) for more detail about the experiences of this RTO and others delivering training from the Business Services Training Package.



Case study 1: Foundation Skills Training Package

The Foundation Skills (FSK) Training Package was developed primarily to improve low levels of literacy and numeracy skills among adult learners undertaking VET (Tout 2018) and is often delivered in combination with other training packages. It supports learners to improve their literacy and numeracy skills, with the aim of improving employment outcomes and/or progression through further study.

The following characteristics guided the selection of this training package as one of the five case studies for the semi-structured interviews:

- It does not include practical training and assessment.
- It supports a diverse learner demographic.

Two¹² of the 15 semi-structured interviews were with RTOs that delivered training from the Foundation Skills Training Package, including a large training provider delivering training in Victoria and a medium-sized RTO from South Australia.

Vulnerable students

There was commonality in how these case study RTOs described many of their foundation skills students. These students were often: from low socioeconomic backgrounds; migrants with low English and low literacy skills; and non-traditional¹³ or second-chance learners.¹⁴ The complexity of these learner profiles tends to mean that online training delivery was not suitable. One interviewee highlighted that face-to-face learning is critical for these learners, particularly if the cohort has existing comprehension issues. Further compounding the learning challenges faced by many of these students, is a level of digital divide¹⁵ and lack of digital skills:

Biggest challenges were around resources for the students to access and get online — computers, internet dongles, monitors. Allowing people to connect online. Deal with low socioeconomic students.

Key points

- Digital poverty and a lack of digital skills posed significant challenges for many Foundation Skills learners
- Access to funding for technology can make the difference between students continuing their learning or withdrawing from training
- Some learner profiles are not suited to online training delivery

12 One of these RTOs also delivered training from the Community Services Training Packages. Other RTOs also delivered training from more than one of the training package case studies; this means the total of RTOs from each case study will sum to more than 15 due to some RTOs delivering and discussing more than one case study training package in the semi-structured interviews.

13 'There is no one clear definition for non-traditional students; however, this is a term often connected with tertiary education students who have taken an educational route that may be considered outside of a more established path' (VOCEDplus, Podlet; Non-traditional students).

14 'Second chance education refers to formal educational opportunities undertaken by learners who have not been through the conventional academic pathway of school completion followed by post-school study' (VOCEDplus, Podlet: Second chance education).

15 'The term "digital divide" refers to the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socioeconomic levels with regard to both their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities' (OECD 2002).

The level of digital divide among students became starkly apparent for these RTOs when they transitioned their foundation skills courses online in response to the pandemic. For one RTO, this meant some students had to withdraw or delay learning as they were unable to transition online due to a lack of appropriate technology and/or no reliable internet access:

We definitely had withdrawals and delays within FSK. Students did withdraw and/or delay courses.

To assist those students who lacked access to the technology suitable for online learning, a Victorian RTO purchased a significant number of laptops and internet dongles to lend to students.¹⁶ This provision of technology did not, however, address the students' inability to use it. The lack of digital skills among some foundation skills students led to an increased incidence of trainers providing one-on-one telephone support to these students.

Even with the challenges identified above, there is an appetite among these RTOs to incorporate more elements of online training delivery in the future:

This is first time I've seen a shift within the mentality of trainers that they can actually do it online — what I mean is that we've had e-learning capability for 10 years but [this is] the first time I've seen a lesser resistance to taking on online capabilities. They are seeing future benefits and how it can bring people together.

For one RTO, this may mean having a series of introductory face-to-face classes before moving online, reverting back for intermittent face-to-face classes:

We're looking hard at our foundation skills now — where can we go? Our engagement within the courses is not what it was previous to COVID-19. Where we would like to be would be everyone comfortably engaging online. Ideally, face-to-face engagement first [and] then move online, then a combination of coming back for some face-to-face and then back online ... We're really looking at how to engage these people and move them into future learning pathways.

A similar sentiment was articulated by another RTO, who described the orientation sessions recently initiated, which step students through the online learning process prior to the commencement of learning. Throughout the conversations, it was evident that RTOs were aware and acknowledged that for some students the delivery of training online will always present difficulties for them:

For lower-level learners a face-to-face environment is critical ... Lower-level vocational education English courses, where we are delivering to migrants with low English and low literacy skills, are difficult to deliver online; there are comprehension issues.

¹⁶ Skilling up Victorians to get through the Coronavirus crisis provided \$68.9 million in funding to help training providers to transition online and keep staff employed <<https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/skilling-victorians-get-through-coronavirus-crisis>>.



Case study 2: Community Services Training Package

The Community Services (CHC) Training Package contains qualifications that support a variety of job roles in the community services sector, including – but not limited to – early childhood education and care, aged care, mental health, and disability services (SkillsIQ 2021a).

This training package was selected as one of the five case studies as it experiences high levels of enrolments and includes qualifications that incorporate a mix of practical and theoretical elements.

Five of the 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with RTOs that delivered training from the Community Services Training Package. These RTOs varied in size and were located across the eastern states and South Australia. Some of these RTOs also delivered training from the Health Services Training Package, and at times overlap occurred with the Community Services Training Package when discussing their experience.

A mixed response to online delivery

Some case study RTOs delivering training from the Community Services Training Package expressed concerns about online training delivery. These concerns involved not only issues related to practical training or assessment, but also to the emotive nature of the material being taught.

For one RTO, their duty of care to ensure the emotional wellbeing of their students was top of mind when delivering training on certain topics. Suicide risk, child protection, and family and domestic violence are topics that can elicit a highly emotive response from students, and it is the RTO's role to monitor and support students who may experience distress when learning about these topics. This RTO was particularly conscious of this responsibility, as many of their students come from high-risk backgrounds, including being victims themselves of family and domestic violence. The online learning environment did not allow trainers to confidently provide that duty of care:

Complicated [were] high-risk units like responding to suicidal risk, child protection, mandatory notification course; these are harder to deliver online due to our duty of care to make sure students are tracking ok. Family and domestic violence courses, these bring up emotion in some people so better delivered face-to-face.

A similar sentiment was expressed by another RTO that also taught qualifications from the Health Services Training Package. Although this organisation did not identify having many students from high-risk backgrounds, its trainers preferred face-to-face teaching as this medium was more conducive to the discussion of sensitive topics. Discussions on dementia care, elder abuse and palliative care were not considered appropriate for online delivery. When teaching these more sensitive topics, the trainers – who had all previously been employed in the field in which they now teach – would also share first-hand accounts from their time in the profession. This type of sharing was considered to have a greater impact in a face-to-face environment.

Key points

- A duty of care for student wellbeing raises concerns over the online delivery of emotive topics
- Some units transitioned online with ease, including aspects of work, health and safety; cultural diversity; and legal and ethics related units
- Qualifications in early childhood education and care were considered suitable for online training

Interestingly, both of the RTOs cited above recognised that, as a result of transitioning all training to an online environment in response to the pandemic, some topics could be effectively taught online and would likely continue to have an online presence in the future. Both RTOs stated that elements of work, health and safety are suitable to online delivery, while individually they identified cultural diversity, mental health, legal and ethics-related topics as also suitable for online delivery:

Courses like legal and ethical, work, health and safety can be done fairly easily online ... Child protection is mixed as some components like the dry and boring legal parts can be delivered online but when talking about indicators and signs of abuse it needs to be face-to-face.

There was agreement among RTOs delivering the Certificate III and Diploma in Early Childhood Education and Care that online training was suited to these qualifications. This was primarily driven by the convenience that this delivery mode provides to their students, many of whom are balancing their study commitments with full-time work and family commitments. Being able to access learning materials at a convenient time was well received by students. One RTO was particularly enthusiastic about their transition to online training delivery: their investment in a mobile-friendly LMS enabled them to give students the flexibility to access learning materials and quizzes at any time:

We try and talk to students about those micro study opportunities, not making it so overwhelming ... your learning is in your back pocket.

This RTO used the term ‘micro study opportunities’ to describe how they encouraged students to take five minutes whenever they could to review learning materials on their mobile, reporting that their students are now more engaged with their learning and are more proactive in contacting trainers for assistance rather than waiting for the next workplace visit.



Case study 3: Hairdressing and Beauty Training Package

The Hairdressing and Beauty (SHB) Training Package contains qualifications that support job roles in the hairdressing and beauty services sector, including – but not limited to – occupations such as hairdresser, nail technician, beauty therapist and salon manager (SkillsIQ 2021b). The Certificate III in Hairdressing is usually delivered through an apprenticeship, combining work and training.

Key points

- Hairdressing and beauty students struggled to engage with online learning
- RTOs did what was necessary to ensure continuity of learning during lockdown restrictions
- There was little appetite to pursue online learning in the future

The following characteristics guided the selection of this training package as one of the five case studies for the semi-structured interviews:

- Qualifications are heavily reliant on practical training and assessment.
- The package attracts a different learner demographic from the other trades-based training packages.

Three of the 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with RTOs that delivered training from the Hairdressing and Beauty Training Package. These RTOs varied in size and were located across the eastern states and South Australia.

Continuity of student learning driving online training delivery during lockdown

Qualifications (or parts thereof) from the Hairdressing and Beauty Training Package were reported as quite challenging to transfer to an online setting, mainly due to the package's many practical elements. These RTOs did what was necessary to continue teaching students during lockdowns, and this meant moving theory online and delaying practical components. By delaying practical components, some theory had to be taught earlier than it would be under non-pandemic circumstances. One medium-sized private RTO described these changes as:

Setting aside the principles of delivery ... [principles] which are critical to learner information and retention, relevance, and relationship between one topic and another. [Principles] which aim to form a learner's sound knowledge and skills acquisition through a logical order, and are informed by industry as the best approach to the delivery of SHB courses.

This RTO also went on to describe the pandemic timetable reordering as:

Designed to keep the learner engaged in their learning journey by keeping the information in front of them fresh.

To counteract any longer-term implications for student outcomes that might arise from delivering the curriculum out of sequence, this RTO – and others reported similar actions – ran refreshers for their students following the resumption of practical training and prior to students' final and summative

assessments. While this adjustment was reported as placing additional financial strain on the RTO, the RTO felt it necessary to ensure quality learning and uncompromised student outcomes. Other challenges were also experienced by these RTOs, relating to:

- industry/employer expectations
- student characteristics and student choice.

RTOs delivering training from the Hairdressing and Beauty Training Package identified a strong industry (and employer) preference for graduates who complete their training in a face-to-face environment, with some of these RTOs expressing a high level of criticism of online training and a determination to continue their delivery of training solely in a face-to-face setting.

These RTOs experienced many challenges relating to student engagement when they were unable to deliver face-to-face training, with poor student engagement reported as more noticeable among the younger students. Additionally, poor engagement was also attributed to the types of students who undertake training for the hairdressing and beauty industry; these students were reported as thriving in a face-to-face environment and struggled to learn effectively online:

Our students really struggled working off campus, some we chased constantly for their work. Some students struggled with engagement. The interesting thing was, when they came back, they ran through the door and nobody wanted to do online theory in the future. We lost the motivation, only a small percentage of highly motivated students were on the ball. Our students and industry are people-focused.

At the time of interviews, one RTO was still offering hybrid classes, whereby the trainer was teaching in a face-to-face environment but was simultaneously live-streaming classes through Zoom. This approach was designed to accommodate students who couldn't attend in person, for a variety of reasons, such as illness, or work placement employers who preferred that students not attend classes in person due to coronavirus risks. This, however, was also more challenging for trainers:

This is a bit more tricky for the trainers in managing the classroom and what's going on online.

The remaining case study RTOs had reverted to their pre-pandemic training delivery modes. There was little appetite to pursue an expanded scope of online training delivery among these RTOs. Their experience during pandemic lockdowns magnified their view of the unsuitability of online training for hairdressing and beauty qualifications.



Case study 4: Business Services Training Package

The Business Services (BSB) Training Package contains qualifications that provide skills to workers who are involved in business operations, either in their own organisation or through the provision of professional services to other organisations. These qualifications include skills related to compliance, conveyancing, human resources, information management, marketing, project management, and work health and safety (PwC's Skills for Australia 2021).

This training package was selected as one of the five case studies as it experiences high levels of enrolments and contains training with few practical elements.

Four of the 15 semi-structured interviews were with RTOs that delivered training from the Business Services Training Package. These RTOs varied in size and, although based across the eastern states, some delivered training nationally.

It's not all smooth sailing for business services

The pre-pandemic training delivery models of these four case study RTOs were mixed, with two offering a hybrid of online and face-to-face training, one offering 100% face-to-face, while another was 100% online. Overall, the training contained in the Business Services Training Package transitioned to the online environment relatively easily, due to the computer-based nature of the training:

Business administration was the easiest to deliver online as much of the training takes place on computers anyway.

That said, while training relating to business administration and project management was identified as some of the easiest to shift online, units focusing on human management and human resources posed a greater challenge. These units required a level of interaction and teamwork from students, something that was difficult to address effectively through the online learning environment:

Project management was quite easy to go online, but units that focused on human management and human resources that required interaction and teamwork were more challenging to deliver online.

The student demographics were slightly different from the other case studies; for example, one of these RTOs delivered 100% of their training to international students, while in another, international students made up approximately 85% of their student base. The delivery of training to international students pre-pandemic was regulated by restrictions stipulating how much training could be delivered online.¹⁷

Key points

- Units requiring high levels of student interaction and teamwork were the most challenging to shift online, such as those focused on human management and human resources
- Extensive upskilling of trainers helped to address student engagement concerns

¹⁷ 'Standard 8 maintains the existing provision that prevents exclusive online or distance learning for an international student on a student visa. Only one-third of a course may be undertaken online by higher education and VET students on a student visa', General factsheet, National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018.

However, the coronavirus pandemic resulted in the application of temporary flexible regulatory arrangements, enabling ASQA-regulated VET and ELICOS providers to use a distance delivery mode (that is, online) for training and assessment.¹⁸

As with other training packages, the Business Services Training Package experienced challenges around student engagement. One RTO highlighted an issue of students logging on but not remaining present in the online class. Another RTO experienced engagement issues early on but felt they were able to successfully address this by providing additional training and support to the trainers on how to more effectively engage students.

While initially finding online training delivery very challenging, trainers were much more comfortable with this delivery mode after significant upskilling. Training was provided on how to use programs like Zoom and Microsoft Teams, how to facilitate breakout rooms, and how to ‘teach’ online. As a way of continuously improving the online learning experience for students, extensive collaboration and the sharing of best practice, tips and tricks between trainers were practised. Trainers often found themselves in the position of then having to train students on how to navigate the online learning environment:

I don’t think we had any trainers that had experience delivering classes online. [We] had to support trainers with extensive training sessions on how to conduct a zoom session and how to conduct training (e.g., breakout rooms). And after that it was up to the trainers to train the students, for some students they figured it out very easily and for others it was harder.

The experience of the RTO that was 100% online prior to the pandemic was different from the other case study RTOs. Although this RTO didn’t need to transition any of its training online, it experienced challenges relating to student circumstances. Their students tended to be in the mature-age cohort, already employed and looking to upskill or gain formal qualifications for skills held. Many of their students studied while at work, and those who were unable to attend their workplace during lockdown experienced some technological and software challenges. Some of the students who had previously studied at work did not have the technology (i.e., computers/laptops and/or internet access) necessary to complete training in their home environment. Although trainers were experienced in delivering training online, they had to be flexible and work with changing student availability, as some students had to balance increased family commitments such as home-schooling during lockdown.

18 CRICOS and ELICOS delivery – temporary flexible regulatory arrangements <asqa.gov.au/covid-19/cricos-and-elicos-delivery>.



Case study 5: Training packages with strong practical elements

Due to challenges in recruiting RTOs that deliver training from trade-related training packages for semi-structured interviews, RTOs that delivered training from the following three training packages were combined to make up this fifth case study:

- CPC – Construction, Plumbing and Services Training Package: three RTOs
- MEM – Manufacturing and Engineering Training Package: one RTO
- UEE – Electrotechnology Training Package: one RTO.

The highly practical nature of the training, as well as a relatively high number of enrolments undertaken through an apprenticeship pathway, informed the choice of these training packages.

Qualifications from the Construction, Plumbing and Services Training Package underpin a wide range of occupations, including trades assistant, shopfitter, plumber, carpenter and joiner (Australian Apprenticeship Pathways 2021).

Electrotechnology qualifications provide the skills necessary for the design, maintenance, installation and repair of all electrical and electronic equipment, with relevance to many sectors, including mining, construction, communications, and renewables (Australian Industry Standards 2021).

Qualifications contained within the Manufacturing and Engineering Training Package include a range of engineering qualifications, while also providing the skills necessary for occupations in jewellery manufacturing and marine construction (training.gov.au 2021).

Additional demands placed on trainers when shifting online

These case study RTOs followed the path taken by other RTOs delivering practical training and assessment; that is, transitioning theory online and delaying the practical components until face-to-face training could resume. For many, this necessitated refreshing students on the theory they had been taught online once they returned to the classroom (or workplace).

Issues associated with student engagement and increased pressure on trainers were some of the main challenges faced by these RTOs when shifting training online. Trainers found themselves providing additional support to many students outside the normal teaching times, which included assistance over the phone or via email relating to questions about learning materials, as well as troubleshooting assistance with technology and following up students with attendance issues. Furthermore, once face-to-face training resumed, trainers often had to teach additional classes, since social distancing restrictions stipulated smaller class sizes, with one large RTO acknowledging this as:

A big burden on staff, having to do triple time as class numbers had to be reduced to accommodate COVID-safe procedures.

Key points

- Trainers experienced increased demands on their time not only when moving to online, but also when returning to the classroom
- ‘Soft’ skills were identified by these RTOs as suitable for online delivery
- Online training delivery highlighted LLN deficiencies in some students

In addition to the increased time required from trainers to provide assistance to online students, trainers also needed to commit to upskilling and learning how to use the technology and software necessary to deliver training online. Early on, training was provided to trainers on how to use programs like Zoom and Microsoft Teams; however, the level of training provided varied across RTOs, with some training restricted to the basics of how to use these programs, while others received more in-depth training on techniques for engaging students, teaching effectively online and managing a class online.

According to one RTO, transitioning online meant the discovery of ‘hidden literacy issues’ among some of their students:

This rocked students with lower LLN levels to the surface, some can read and read for meaning, while others read for sake of reading. If there are any latent literacy issues, they are starting to manifest and become more obvious when online ... These students complete a LLN test before they start and it's all ok, but it's that next level of LLN, these students may normally struggle a bit, but through online it's brought to the fore.

This RTO also indicated that, when teaching in person, a trainer can more easily elaborate and demonstrate the meaning of the text, which assists in student comprehension.

Although these case study RTOs delivered little to no training online before the pandemic, most realised during lockdown that certain units within the qualifications they delivered could be successfully delivered online on a more permanent basis. Those units considered appropriate for online delivery were predominantly those related to soft skills,¹⁹ such as communication.

One RTO, a group training organisation based regionally, had no intention of delivering training online in the future since most of their training occurs in the workplace and is unsuitable for online delivery. The only exception being an injured apprentice or an individual on Workcover who is unable to attend their workplace. Some of the biggest challenges faced by this RTO in the transition to an online environment was supporting the mental health of their apprentices and trainers. The trainers also held a strong preference for face-to-face training:

We are very people- and hands-on focused; many of the trainers hated online training and much prefer to work with students face-to-face.

¹⁹ Also known as employability skills or generic skills; see footnote 3 (Wibrow 2011).

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Appendix A

Methodology

The findings in this report, the second in a two-part series, are drawn from an online survey of RTOs, administered in collaboration with ASQA, and a series of semi-structured interviews with RTOs.

What is online training delivery?

The terms ‘online learning’ and ‘online training delivery’ have been used in this research to describe the delivery of training over the internet; however, these broad descriptors fail to identify the many nuances that exist in the online training environment, which tend to fall under the categories of blended or hybrid learning.

As described by Griffin and Mihelic (2019), online learning can be delivered synchronously or asynchronously. With rapidly advancing technology, synchronous learning tends to occur through video conferencing software such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams, allowing students and trainers to interact and respond as if they were in a face-to-face environment. Asynchronous learning in online environments refers to self-paced or self-directed learning, whereby students use the online learning space to access resources and complete learning modules and assessments, often through an RTO’s learning management system (LMS).

Through the online survey, and even more so in the semi-structured interviews, it became apparent that blended or hybrid training delivery modes will form a greater part of future training delivery than it did prior to the pandemic. Some examples of blended or hybrid delivery models identified by RTOs through the semi-structured interviews include:

- face-to-face classes, accompanied by self-paced learning online
- face-to-face workplace training and assessment, accompanied by self-paced learning online
- a series of introductory face-to-face classes, followed by a shift to online training delivery (that is, Zoom or Microsoft Teams) or online training delivery interspersed with face-to-face classes
- students completing self-directed learning online while on the RTOs premises
- a trainer simultaneously delivering training to both students in a classroom and online, with these students cycling between being in the classroom and online, according to the circumstances.

One difficulty will lie in how these delivery modes are accurately captured in future data collections, depending on the level of detail required. Effectively and accurately capturing how students are learning will help policy-makers and VET stakeholders to understand how students are learning, as well as assist in identifying any resultant implications for student outcomes.

Online survey of RTOs

The online survey, including questionnaire development and execution, was conducted in collaboration with ASQA. The mutual decision to collaborate for the purpose of the online survey was a result of the synergies between this NCVET research project and ASQA’s Strategic review into online learning in the

VET sector²⁰. This collaboration enabled the sharing of ideas and knowledge between NCVER and ASQA, while also reducing the potential for survey fatigue among RTOs.

ACIL Allen was the fieldwork provider contracted by ASQA to undertake the survey programming, distribution of survey links to ASQA's database of training providers and analysis of survey results.

Training providers were invited via email to participate in the survey and, while the survey was live, reminder emails were sent encouraging them to complete the survey. In addition to the targeted emails, the survey was promoted through ASQA and NCVER social media channels.

A total of 3280 ASQA-regulated training providers were invited to respond to the online survey, of which 1247 completed the survey, representing a response rate of 38%. The data were collected between 19 February and 23 March 2021.

Tables A1 to A4 provide details of the types of training providers who responded to the online survey.

Table A1 Survey response by provider type, 2021

Provider type	Survey response	
	No.	%
Private training provider	951	76.3
Enterprise registered training organisation	124	9.9
Community education provider	63	5.1
School	49	3.9
TAFE	15	1.2
University	5	0.4
Other	40	3.2
Total	1 247	100.0

Note: The survey asked following question: What best describes your organisation? (n = 1247).

Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

Table A2 Number of unique student enrolments at RTOs who responded to the survey, as at 1 March 2020

Number of unique student enrolments	No.	%
None	62	5.0
1 to 50	240	19.2
51 to 200	342	27.4
201 to 500	247	19.8
501 to 1 000	153	12.3
1 001 to 3 000	127	10.2
3 001 to 6 000	34	2.7
6 001 to 10 000	13	1.0
More than 10 000	29	2.3
Total	1 247	100.0

Note: The survey asked the following question: Approximately how many unique student enrolments did your organisation have across all VET and ELICOS training programs you offered as at 1 March 2020? Single response (n = 1247).

Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

20 <<https://www.asqa.gov.au/about/how-we-regulate/strategic-reviews/online-learning-vet-sector>>.

Table A3 Survey response by principal state/territory of business, 2021

State/territory	No.	%
New South Wales	386	31.0
Victoria	253	20.3
Queensland	374	30.0
South Australia	70	5.6
Western Australia	86	6.9
Tasmania	24	1.9
Northern Territory	19	1.5
Australian Capital Territory	34	2.7
Overseas	1	0.1
Total	1 247	100.0

Note: The survey asked following question: Where is your principal place of business located? Single response (n = 1247).

Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

Table A4 Survey response by location of principal place of business, 2021

Location	No.	%
Urban	909	73.0
Regional	313	25.1
Remote	24	1.9
Total	1 246	100.0

Note: Is your principal place of business in a urban/regional/remote location? Single response (n = 1246). Note: This question was not asked of overseas respondents.

Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

Semi-structured interviews

RTOs that participated in the online survey were asked whether they would be willing to participate in further research, either with NCVER and/or ASQA. A list of survey participants who agreed to be contacted by NCVER for further research was provided by ACIL Allen and used to recruit respondents for the semi-structured interviews. These contact details were provided as a standalone list and not linked to the survey responses of the individuals, therefore maintaining the confidentiality and anonymity of their individual survey responses.

A total of 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, who predominantly held job titles such as Training Operations Manager or Course Coordinator. For smaller RTOs, some participants held more senior roles. All participants had close contact with their trainers and students, with some still teaching, while others had been trainers in the past. Participants represented small, medium and large private training providers (including one that was also an enterprise training provider and two were group training organisations), as well as three TAFE institutes.

The semi-structured interviews focused on seven training packages, grouped into five case studies. These case studies represent a variety of training types (that is, practical and non-practical training and assessment), differing levels of online delivery pre-pandemic, and a diversity of student cohorts. Some RTOs delivered training from more than one of these training packages. Where this was the case, their responses were reported across multiple training packages.

Table A5 Participants involved in the semi-structured interviews by training package, 2021

Training package	Number of RTOs delivering training package
BSB – Business Services	4
CHC – Community Services	5
CPC – Construction, Plumbing and Services	3
FSK – Foundation Skills	2
MEM – Manufacturing and Engineering	1
SHB – Hairdressing and Beauty Services	3
UEE – Electrotechnology	1
Total*	15

*Note: The total number of training packages is more than the total number of semi-structured interviews as some participants were from RTOs that delivered training from more than one of the case study training packages.

Research questions

There is no single research question for this project, rather a list of research objectives guiding it:

- the extent of the shift to online delivery during the coronavirus pandemic
- the reasons for RTOs transitioning to online delivery (given that it was not mandated) and the type of software/technology used
- whether the move to online delivery applied to all programs, or to some only, or to parts of programs, and the reasons for their application, or not (for example, strict assessment rules for training packages and/or mandatory work placements, funding source)
- the opportunities and challenges encountered in moving to online delivery, either fully or partially, for RTOs and trainers, and what suited different categories of students; what worked well and what didn't in facilitating online delivery
- if and how online delivery impacted on training and assessment practices and mandatory work placement, as well as on the quality of assessment and/or training delivery, for different categories of students or types of training
- what barriers to accessibility, student engagement, learning and course completion outcomes for different learner cohorts were identified and how these were addressed
- the extent to which shifts to full or partial online learning may have impacted on student learning outcomes and satisfaction rates
- the likelihood of RTOs changing how they deliver training in the future, post-pandemic.

Appendix B

Results of the online survey of ASQA-regulated RTOs

Table B1 Overall perceptions among RTOs of the quality of online training compared with face-to-face training by principal state/territory of business, 2021 (%)

State/territory	Much better	Somewhat better	About the same	Somewhat worse	Much worse	Unsure	Total
New South Wales	6.2	15.0	32.1	26.9	8.3	11.4	100.0
Victoria	8.3	17.8	36.4	22.9	5.5	9.1	100.0
Queensland	7.8	12.0	31.3	30.7	9.6	8.6	100.0
South Australia	1.4	17.1	20.0	41.4	7.1	12.9	100.0
Western Australia	7.0	10.5	31.4	29.1	15.1	7.0	100.0
Tasmania	4.2	16.7	12.5	25.0	29.2	12.5	100.0
Northern Territory	5.3	21.1	21.1	47.4	5.3	0.0	100.0
Australian Capital Territory	8.8	11.8	17.6	41.2	20.6	0.0	100.0
Overseas	0.0	0.0	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	100.0
Total	6.9	14.5	31.1	28.9	9.2	9.4	100.0

Note: The survey asked the following question: Overall, how do you think the quality of online delivery compares with face-to-face delivery? Single response (n = 1247).

Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

Table B2 Risks that RTOs associated with the quality of training and assessment outcomes with online training, 2021 (%)

Risks	%
Poor student engagement	28.4
Integrity of practical assessment	15.4
Plagiarism and cheating	12.7
Authentication of students	12.1
Poor quality	9.1
Loss of practical skills	7.2
Loss of collaborative process	5.9
Poor student support	5.5
Student access to digital environment	4.0
Loss of knowledge depth	3.5
Adapting the curriculum	2.6
Poor resource quality	2.6
Poor student experience	2.4
Trainer dependence	2.1
Student digital literacy	1.9
Ensuring timelines are upheld	1.8
Student retention	1.4
Work placement access	1.4
Communication with ESL students	1.2
Student attendance	1.1
High risk content	0.9
N/A	8.2
No risk	10.0

Note: The survey asked the following question: Based on your experience and understanding of online learning, what risks to the quality of training/assessment outcomes do you associate with online learning? Open-ended (n = 1247).

Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

Table B3 Reasons why RTOs believed the move to online training delivery had improved the quality of training, 2021 (%)

Reasons	%
Flexibility of learning	30.8
Quality of student engagement	20.6
Ability to change and update resources	19.4
Ability to review practice	17.8
Ability to interact with trainers online	11.3
Quality of online environment	8.1
Quality of support services	6.1
More time to study	3.2
Ability of trainer to improve	3.2
Quality of existing online infrastructure	2.0
Quality of assessment delivery	2.0
Ability to monitor students	1.6
Ability of students to access internet	1.2
Quality of blended method delivery	1.2
Other	2.8

Notes: The survey asked the following question: Why do you think the quality of training improved because of the shift online? Open-ended. This question was asked to those who thought the quality of training had improved (either slightly or significantly) when shifting online (n = 247).
The sum of percentages will equate to more than 100% as some free-text answers were coded into multiple-response categories.
Response categories with n = 2 or fewer respondents are not included in this table. The response code of 'no change' (1.2%) is not included in this table.

Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

Table B4 Reasons why RTOs believed the move to online training delivery caused a decline in the quality of training, 2021 (%)

Reasons	%
Quality of student engagement	31.7
Lack of face-to-face interaction	26.3
Reduced practical activity	15.5
Ability of students to access internet	6.1
Quality of assessment delivery	5.4
Quality of online environment	5.0
Ability to interact with trainers online	4.7
Ability to change and update resources	4.0
Student disadvantage (disability, financial).	3.6
Delay to allow face-to-face training	2.9
Ability to monitor students	2.5
Quality of support services	2.5
Ability to review practice	2.5
Ability of trainer to improve	1.8
Student language barrier	1.4
Other	3.6

Notes: The survey asked the following question: Why do you think the quality of training declined because of the shift online? Open-ended. This question was asked to those who thought the quality of training had declined (either slightly or significantly) when shifting online (n = 278).
The sum of percentages will equate to more than 100% as some free-text answers were coded into multiple-response categories.
Response categories with n = 2 or fewer respondents are not included in this table.

Source: ASQA and NCVER online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

Table B5 Reasons why RTOs believed there was no change to the quality of training when training delivery moved online, 2021 (%)

Reasons	%
Quality of existing online infrastructure	16.6
Ability to interact with trainers online	13.0
Ability to change and update resources	11.7
Quality of student engagement	11.7
Quality of support services	8.1
Quality of online environment	7.2
Ability to review practice	5.5
Flexibility of learning	4.9
Delay to allow face-to-face training	4.6
Ability of trainer to improve	4.2
Lack of face-to-face interaction	3.9
Quality of blended method delivery	3.3
Reduced practical activity	2.3
Ability to monitor students	1.3
Quality of assessment delivery	1.0

Notes: The survey asked the following question: Why do you think the quality of training did not change because of the shift online? Open-ended. This question was asked to those who thought the quality of training did not change when shifting online (n = 307). The sum of percentages will not equate to 100% as some free-text answers were coded into multiple-response categories. Response categories with n = 2 or less respondents are not included in this table, and the response code of 'no change' (22.5%) is not included in this table.

Source: ASQA and NCVET online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.

Table B6 RTOs that changed training delivery modes in response to the coronavirus pandemic by principal state/territory of business, 2021 (%)

State/territory	Shifted training online	Did not shift any training online	Total
New South Wales	74.3	25.7	100.0
Victoria	83.5	16.5	100.0
Queensland	71.9	28.1	100.0
South Australia	74.3	25.7	100.0
Western Australia	73.5	26.5	100.0
Tasmania	66.7	33.3	100.0
Northern Territory	68.4	31.6	100.0
Australian Capital Territory	75.0	25.0	100.0
Overseas	100.0	0.0	100.0
Total	75.2	24.8	100.0

Note: The survey asked the following question: In response to COVID-19, which of the following scenarios was most relevant to your organisation? The total/denominator represents the number of providers who either provided all online services, excluding practical work placements, blended delivery or no online pre-COVID (that is, everything except all online) (n = 1188).

Source: ASQA and NCVET online survey of training providers, conducted February to March 2021.



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